

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF WELFARE

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POOR RELIEF
IN
PENNSYLVANIA



By Emil Frankel
Special Representative



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FOREWORD

While some other States have made studies of their poor relief administration it is my belief that Pennsylvania is the first state that has ever undertaken a comprehensive study of her Poor Law Administration, beginning with an analysis of the Law itself and its origins and ending with an intimate review of hundreds of individual cases which had received relief of various sorts under the law. Our study attempted to get at not only the more readily ascertainable facts concerning our County Poor Relief Administration, but gathered facts and figures from even the smallest political sub-divisions of our State.

The foundation for any intelligent social action must be built up on facts and these we have gathered. We have had the experience of the whole state to draw upon and we are therefore able to generalize not from isolated facts but from a great body of authentic information gathered by trained observers and investigators.

This pamphlet presents briefly the results of the study the full details of which will be incorporated in a later publication.

ELLEN C. POTTER, M. D.
Secretary of Welfare.



POOR RELIEF IN PENNSYLVANIA¹

By Emil Frankel

PENNSYLVANIA'S POOR LAWS

Our numerous poor laws enacted up to date give evidence that caring for the poor was and is one of the very important functions of local government.

As early as 1676 the Duke of York Laws made provisions for the poor. In 1771 was passed an act for the relief of the poor; and this is worthy of note, it was almost identical in principle and in language with the Elizabethan Poor Laws of England. 1836 witnessed the enactment of a new general poor law, which was substantially a re-enactment of the 1771 act as no change of any consequence was made in the text. Numerous special acts have followed the 1836 law.

Commendable as is our concern for the unfortunates in our midst, it is to be regretted that ever since the enactment of poor laws the tendency has been toward special legislation and away from uniformity so that we have on our statute books 1400 poor laws, of which over 800 are special and local. This has brought about a condition which makes it frequently impossible to determine what laws are really in force.

Our poor law legislation since 1836 has made few changes in the principles of the Elizabethan Poor Laws and such slight changes as have been made have dealt almost exclusively with administrative features. Our great and progressive State, therefore, today operates substantially under the Elizabethan Poor Laws which England herself discarded decades ago.

PRESENT SYSTEMS OF POOR LAW ADMINISTRATION.

Due to this tendency towards divergency in Poor Law Legislation we have a variety of systems of Poor Law Administration.

(1) The City of Philadelphia under a Department of Public Welfare taking in the major portions of the city, but maintaining six separate Poor Districts in the areas comprising the former

¹From a paper on "WHAT THE STUDY OF THE POOR LAWS REVEALED," given April 16, 1925, before the Pennsylvania Conference on Social Welfare. The summary data presented in this paper will soon be published in more extensive form by the Department.

THE POOR DISTRICTS OF PENNSYLVANIA

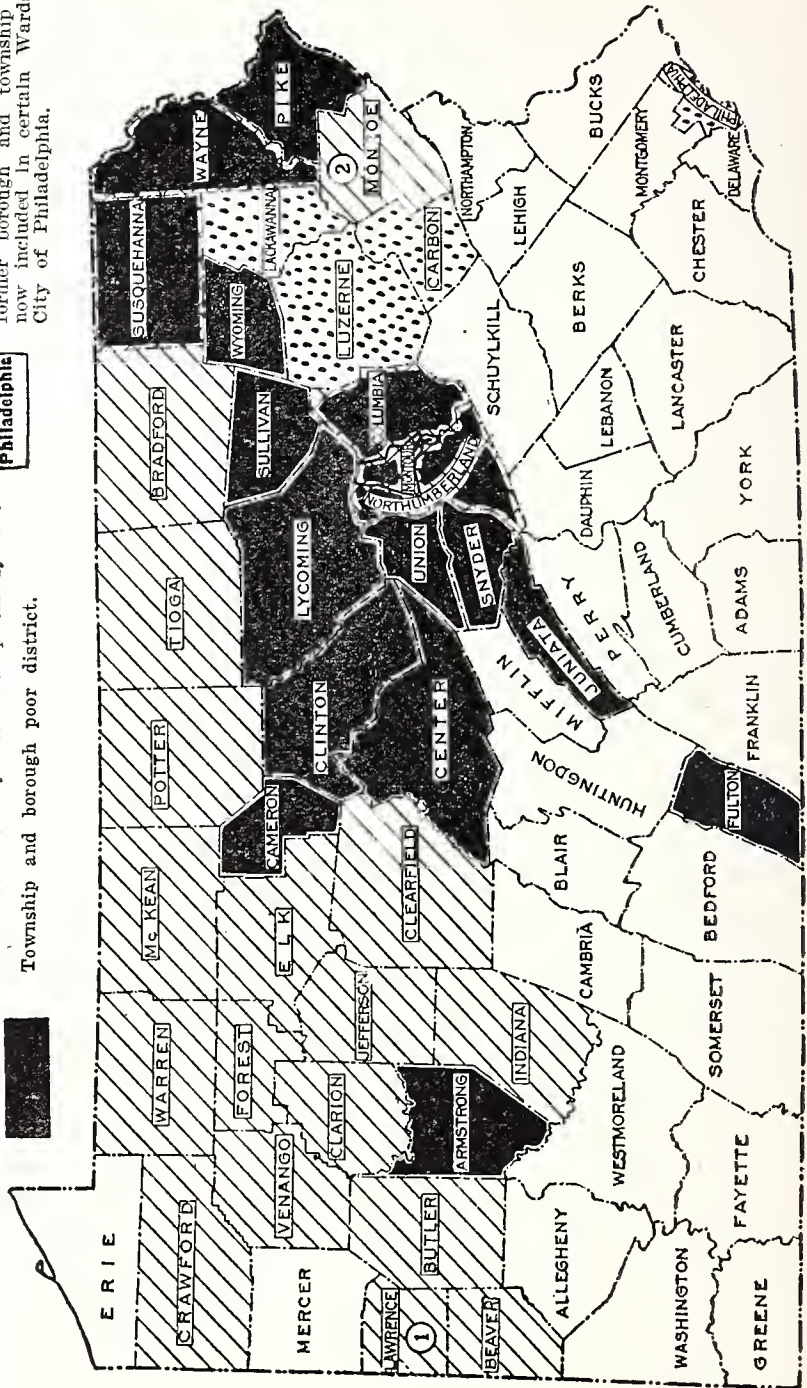
County unit poor districts with Directors of the Poor including Directors of Home for Destitute in Westmoreland County and one municipal government district in Allegheny County.

County unit poor districts with County Commissioners acting as Directors of the Poor and one municipal government district in McKean County. (1) and (2)—Lawrence and Monroe Counties have recently voted to adopt this system.

Township and borough poor district.

Centralized Poor Districts with one composed of parts of Luzerne and Carbon Counties and one composed of parts of Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties. Includes also some independent township and borough districts.

Municipal government district and six former borough and township districts now included in certain Wards of the City of Philadelphia.



Townships of Bristol, Germantown, Oxford and Lower Dublin, Byberry, Moreland, and the Borough of Roxborough.¹

¹Of these districts the city of Philadelphia, Germantown, Oxford and Lower Dublin, and Roxborough, maintain almshouses.

The City of Pittsburgh under a Department of Public Welfare, but the remainder of Allegheny County administered as a County Unit by three Directors of the Poor.¹

(2) Fifteen Counties with population ranging from 7,477 to 103,236 administered as a County Unit by the three County Commissioners acting as Directors of the Poor, each county maintaining a County Almshouse.²

(3) Twenty-nine Counties with population ranging from 22,875 to 597,465 administered as a County Unit by three regularly elected Directors of the Poor, each county maintaining a County Almshouse.³

(4) Seven Centralized Poor Districts with population ranging from 8,992 to 250,000 confined to three counties in the anthracite coal region under which a number of cities, boroughs, and townships have joined for purposes of poor relief and which districts are generally administered by Directors of the Poor appointed by the Court.⁴

(5) Nineteen Counties with population ranging from 6,297 to 122,079 under the Township and Borough System of Poor Relief comprising 459 separate poor districts with 924 elected overseers of the poor; 29 of the 459 poor districts maintaining local almshouses.⁵

POOR TAXES

When you consider the amounts raised in taxation for poor relief purposes by our various counties you will readily come to the conclusion that they have not been niggardly toward their dependent wards; nor do the large sums raised for poor taxes indicate that the business of caring for the dependent classes is an insignificant affair in Pennsylvania.

¹The city and the rest of the county each maintain an almshouse.

²Beaver, Bradford, Butler, Clarion, Clearfield, Crawford, Elk, Forest, Indiana, Jefferson, McKean, (Bradford City is a separate Poor District) Potter, Tioga, Venango, and Warren.

³Adams, Bedford, Berks, Blair, Bucks, Cambria, Chester, Cumberland, Dauphin, Delaware, Erie, Fayette, Franklin, Greene, Huntingdon, Lancaster, Lebanon, Lehigh, Mercer, Mifflin, Montgomery, Northampton, Perry, Schuylkill, Somerset, Washington, Westmoreland, and York. Here has also been classed Allegheny county, not including Pittsburgh.

⁴The seven Centralized Poor Districts are located in Carbon, Lackawanna, and Luzerne counties; they maintain seven almshouses. Those portions of the counties not organized within any Centralized Poor District administer their poor relief on the Township and Borough System.

⁵Armstrong, Cameron, Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Fulton, Juniata, Lawrence, Lycoming, Monroe, Montour, Northumberland, Pike, Snyder, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Union, Wayne, and Wyoming. Lawrence and Monroe counties have voted recently to abolish the Township and Borough System of poor relief and adopt the County Unit System.

In the last ten years our 67 counties raised over \$100,000,000 in poor taxes. In 1924 alone we raised over \$12,000,000. Ten years ago our poor taxes were \$5,900,000, so that the 1924 figures represent an increase of over 100 percent. The 1924 poor taxes compared with those of twenty years ago represent an increase of 260 percent.

PENNSYLVANIA'S ALMSHOUSES.

The most important instruments through which we are caring for our indigent poor are our 85 almshouses and poor farms varying in size to accommodate from one to 1000 persons. Our survey shows that the total value of investment in almshouse property in our State is about \$16,500,000, which means that for every inmate maintained there is property to the value of \$2,000.

Our 85 almshouse poor districts report 17,300 acres of land owned by the districts, of which 10,390, or less than 60 percent, were under cultivation. The farming expenses amounted to \$361,474.95 and if wages of farm labor are included probably would total \$500,000.

THE ALMSHOUSE POPULATION.

The latest figures compiled by the Department show that we maintained an average of 8,628 inmates in our almshouses in 1923, that is more than one-tenth of the total number enumerated by the United States Census for the whole of the United States in 1923. Our almshouse population has decreased in the last two decades. The United States Census enumerates about 10 percent less inmates in 1923 as against 1904.

Nevertheless, the figures about to be quoted are amazing when you consider this great and wealthy state. The ratio of inmates enumerated on a given date in 1923 was 25 percent higher in Pennsylvania than is the case in the country at large; while the ratio of inmates admitted during 1923 was 35 percent greater in Pennsylvania as compared with the ratio for the whole of the United States. These ratios should even be higher for the figures do not include our potential almshouse population, that is, a considerable number of men and women boarded out by Townships and Borough Poor Districts which do not maintain almshouses.

An astounding fact is the large number of admissions and discharges in our almshouses and the frequency of readmissions. During the last ten years there passed through our almshouses over 150,000 persons. In 1923 over 7,000 persons were admitted. Of this number more than 31 percent had been previously admitted. Those who left the almshouses numbered 7,056. The number who died was 1,331 or 19 percent of the total number leaving.

Since the almshouse inmates generally are of the type who once they enter the almshouse ought to stay there, this flux indicates either laxity in discipline under which they are permitted to enter and go as they see fit or else conditions in our almshouses are such that they cannot stand them for any length of time.

The fact which should be particularly called to your attention is the decided change in the present type of almshouse inmates. Until some years ago the proportion of the able-bodied on the Poor Farm was considerable and the whole idea of having a **poor farm** (emphasis on farm) was that the inmates could work upon it and thus help bear a share of their maintenance. Our 1923 almshouse reports show, however, that only 10 percent of the 8,000 inmates were classed as able-bodied, while the other 90 percent represent the infirm, the chronically ill and the feeble-minded.

CONDITIONS IN OUR ALMSHOUSES.

As may be expected our almshouses exhibit wide differences in equipment and in administration. Conditions in many of our County Almshouses are not ideal and there is room for improvements. But it can be said that due to the cooperative efforts of the Welfare Department and local officials they are much better today than they were a few years ago, and the larger almshouses particularly are constantly improving the services they are rendering.

The conditions existing in many of our small Poor Farms maintained by Townships and Boroughs leave much to be desired. In some of these poor farms the inmates do not receive the treatment that their peculiar physical or mental conditions warrant and the conditions under which some are compelled to live are indeed pitiable.

If the heartrending and revolting scenes that have been witnessed by our own inspectors in visiting these small poor farms were to be described you would rise as one man to demand their immediate abolition. A thorough house cleaning is needed in this form of poor law administration and the Department has its task cut out for the next few years.

OUTDOOR RELIEF.

A rough estimate indicates that \$10,000,000 was the amount spent on outdoor relief during the last ten years. Compared with ten years ago, our expenditures for this form of relief have increased over 100 percent. In 1923 alone our combined Poor Districts, including the Township and Borough Poor Districts dispensed a total of \$1,360,000 on outdoor relief. Here are the expenditures under this item of some of the larger Poor Districts. Shamokin and Coal Town-

ship spent \$46,000; Middle Coal Field Poor District \$49,000; Schuylkill County, \$53,500; Cambria County, \$58,600; Allegheny County, \$72,900; and Central Poor District spent \$153,000.

Approximately 500,000 persons have been recipients of outdoor relief in the last ten years. In 1923 about 45,000 have received such relief in their homes; of these, 5,000 were men, 11,500 women, and 28,500 children.

What are the causes for such a large army of persons seeking public poor relief? It is unfortunate that we do not have reliable figures on the causes of their indigence for you must be aware that any comprehensive program of poor relief must needs be based upon it. Based on the data available we estimate that 55 percent are widows and the wives of husbands confined in institutions for the mentally ill; 25 percent may be classed as the "industrial poor," which means that the dependency of the breadwinner is traceable more or less to industrial causes. In 10 percent of the cases the dependency is traceable to some moral turpitude, desertion, imprisonment; and the remaining 10 percent are the aged dependents.

OUTDOOR RELIEF ADMINISTRATION.

Do we employ our large Outdoor Relief Expenditures wisely and constructively? It can hardly be said that we do. Many of our poor relief officials do not have the proper comprehension of what is required for family rehabilitation work. They are often not equipped to deal effectively with the manifold family and social problems that arise from day to day. "Family case work" is an utterly foreign idea to them. Co-operation between them and private charitable agencies is rarely established and in some instances this is as much the fault of the private charitable agency as it is of the public official.

The experience of one of our large populous poor districts where there is an effective Social Service Exchange should be mentioned in this connection. Of the Poor Board cases 55 percent were identified by the Social Service Exchange as having been dealt with by one or the other social agency in the city, yet the Poor Board refuses to report and clear its cases through the Social Service Exchange and utilize the information so readily available to them.

Outdoor Relief as carried on in Pennsylvania today means chiefly the supplementing of an insufficient income through grants in groceries and other aids in kind. Often the distribution of outdoor relief becomes a routine procedure in which a fixed amount is doled out quite regardless of the individual circumstances.

Food allowances are generally standardized and very much the same kind of food is allowed to the various recipients of outdoor

relief. There is little attempt made to adjust food allowances to the physical or other needs of the individual or family.

AMOUNTS GRANTED IN OUTDOOR RELIEF.

A study of 2,000 families covering 8,500 individuals showed an average monthly relief of \$10.45 per family or \$2.42 per individual per month.

As may be expected there are considerable variations from this average in the monthly amounts expended in outdoor relief by the various Poor Districts. Of the 2,000 cases, 45 percent received less than \$10 per month; 35 percent between \$10 and \$15; 12 percent between \$15 and \$20; and only 8 percent over \$20 per month. It is obvious that on amounts such as these, administered with little or no supervision, nothing constructive in the way of family rehabilitation can be accomplished.

The total amounts granted in outdoor relief to 1500 cases during the year of 1923 show that a little over 40 percent had received less than \$50; 29 percent between \$50 and \$100; 28 percent between \$100 to \$300, and about 3 percent of the recipients of outdoor relief had been granted between \$300 and \$600.

A study made in one Poor District of the total amounts of outdoor relief given to 657 cases from the time of their inception to their close showed that in less than 45 percent of the cases the total relief given amounted to \$100. Almost 50 percent received over \$100 up to \$500. More than 5 percent received over \$500, and in 1 percent of the cases the total relief was over \$1,000.

LENGTH OF TIME OF OUTDOOR RELIEF.

We are now coming to the consideration of an important question in outdoor relief: What is the length of time individuals are dependent upon the public bounty? It seems to be the general impression that the giving of outdoor relief is an emergency affair.

Figures collected from the various poor boards do not bear this out. As a matter of fact, outdoor relief has developed almost into a regular pension system.

A special study made in the summer of 1924 as to the length of time 1,000 "live" cases have received relief showed that only 14 percent had been "on" the various Poor Boards less than six months and 15 percent between one-half year to one year. On the other hand more than 55 percent of the current cases had already been in receipt of outdoor relief from one to five years. And note this—16 percent have been recipients of outdoor relief over five years. We have a number of cases on record who began to receive relief twenty years ago and are still receiving it.

SUMMARY OF POOR RELIEF EXPENDITURES.

During the year 1923 our Total Poor Relief Expenditures amounted to \$7,275,000. Of this amount the Total Almshouse Expenditures constituted \$3,765,000. Outdoor relief was almost 20 percent of the total.

The salaries and wages of our various poor relief officials amounted to \$1,400,000, or 20 percent of the total poor relief expenditures. Of this amount the Directors and Overseers received \$400,000 and the almshouse employees almost \$1,000,000.

In some of our poor districts the Directors or Overseers of the Poor who act as Treasurers receive a Treasurer's Commission, that is, a certain percentage of the total Poor Funds handled. In 1923 we spent almost \$15,000 in Treasurer's Commission in amounts ranging from less than \$10 to \$1,000. One district paid as much as \$3,562.38 in Treasurer's Commission.

The distribution of the 1923 current almshouse expenditures amounting to \$3,167,000 is 69.5 percent for overhead, that is, 31.5 percent for salaries and wages, and 38.0 percent for operation of plant. The inmates' maintenance share in the total current almshouse expenditures was 30.5 percent.

COSTLINESS OF THE TOWNSHIP AND BOROUGH POOR RELIEF SYSTEM.

The advocates of the Township and Borough System of poor relief often assert that this system of caring for the poor is the most economical and least irksome to the taxpayers. Let us cite some figures that will entirely disprove this assertion.

In the ten-year period 1915-1924 the County Unit Poor Districts representing 50 percent of the State's population raised \$26,000,000 in poor taxes. During the same period the Counties under the Township and Borough System of poor relief having 8 percent of the State's population raised \$7,000,000, which means that they had to raise \$2,840,000 or 40 percent more in proportion than the County Unit Poor Districts.

Between 1910 and 1920 the County Unit Poor Districts' increase in population was 13 percent and the increase in poor taxes 73 percent. In the counties under the Township and Borough System the increase in population was only 4 percent while the increase in poor taxes was 71 percent. **A ratio of 47 percent greater than that of the County Unit Poor Districts.**

Based on the 1920 population the per capita poor tax for the ten year period 1915-1924 of the County Unit Poor Districts was \$6.10 and that of the Township and Borough Poor Relief Counties \$10.27, that is 68 percent more.

The cost of maintaining the inmates in our County Unit almshouses during the year 1923 was about 77 cents a day. Contrast this with the cost of maintenance of the inmates in our small Township and Borough Almshouses which was \$1.06 per day or **38 percent more**. It should be pointed out, however, that in some of our small poor farms, run by Townships and Boroughs the cost of maintenance of inmates is as high as \$5 per day.

PROGRAM OF POOR RELIEF.

The facts disclosed show that Pennsylvania undoubtedly is generous in dealing with her dependent classes. Are you wondering whether these large monetary outlays are made to yield 100 percent returns; are our methods of poor relief not obsolete and ill-adapted to present-day needs; are we utilizing our opportunities to the utmost in the **prevention of poverty and dependency**? It should be emphasized that in criticizing our poor relief methods and in suggesting much needed changes we are not unmindful of the numerous high-minded men and women administering faithfully Pennsylvania's official poor relief and no criticism of them personally is intended.

Let us consider very briefly a forward-looking poor relief program which would effectively attack the essential problems of poverty as they present themselves in Pennsylvania today:

(1) Make the County the unit of poor relief administration and abolish absolutely the Township and Borough Systems. Experience has shown that the county system is the best adopted for the purpose.

Since 1830 the abolition of the Township and Borough System of poor relief had been strongly urged by four official Poor Law Commissions. The General Poor Relief Act passed by the Legislature of 1925 is an important step in that direction, but much needs yet to be done.

(2) Create adequate provisions in the almshouse equipment for the present-day type of inmates—the chronically ill and infirm. This means that the farming side of our almshouse administration must become subordinate entirely to that of properly taking care of the inmates and that the almshouse must be “hospitalized.” Upon admission to the almshouse there should be a thorough medical examination of the inmates for proper classification and treatment. This treatment must include such forms of occupation as are within the physical ability of the inmates to perform.

There is growing recognition of the need for hospital service in the almshouse. The Central Poor District in Luzerne County has taken practical steps to install it, so have Dauphin and Delaware

Counties. Through the Department's efforts others are sure to follow.

(3) The Poor Boards must be made to realize that outdoor relief should not be merely almsgiving through an endless chain of grocery orders, but that they should employ paid, full-time welfare workers to do constructive family case work.

The Poor Directors' knowledge of the local neighborhood could be of value in supplementing the results of systematic investigations, but we cannot expect them to do the whole job since they give only part-time and cannot be expected to keep in constant touch with all the families in their charge.

It is absolutely essential that there be close co-operation between the official poor board and private charitable agencies, if the best results are to be obtained.

Beaver and Delaware counties are good examples of what can be done in constructive case work. Beaver county employed a family welfare visitor and in the first few months she has cut off more than 50 families who had been receiving relief some years beyond the time the relief was actually needed. In still many other cases she has found the relief given to be entirely inadequate and she has increased the amounts. Her relief orders are based upon a budget plan. She has established close co-operation between the various private social relief agencies and employers in the county. In the first month she more than saved her salary and did a splendid thing in preventing pauperization.

(4) We must realize that even if the County Unit type of administration prevails in all our counties some of the less populous counties do not have the resources to maintain the modern hospitalized County Home. In that case every effort should be made to have the smaller counties join forces for poor relief purposes and thus permit them a more effective and economical poor relief administration, and lastly,

(5) There should be clearer recognition of the fact that there is a close relationship between dependency and unemployment, industrial accidents and occupational diseases and that a careful inquiry be conducted to determine more accurately the proper methods for the alleviation of this "industrial dependency."

This surely is not a Utopian program and is one that should be put into effect right now, even though our goal is nothing less than the ideal.

